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Mr. Greg Sanders  
U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service  
Ventura Field Office  
2493 Portola Road, Ste. B  
Ventura, CA 93003-7726

FISH AND WILDLIFE  
SERVICE  
SEP 29 2000  
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VENTURA, CA

**RE: Comments on Southern Sea Otter Translocation Program and  
Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement**

Dear Mr. Sanders:

I am writing on behalf of Defenders of Wildlife's membership in the state of California, to submit comments for consideration in the scoping process for the preparation of a Supplemental EIS on the southern sea otter translocation program. I provided oral comments before the Service's representatives at the August 15, 2000 public hearing in Santa Barbara and at the August 17, 2000 public hearing in Monterey and am submitting this letter as a written record of Defenders' comments.

Defenders of Wildlife is a private, non-profit, national wildlife conservation organization and is the sixth largest such organization in the United States. Our membership currently exceeds 430,000, over one-eighth of whom reside in California. Therefore, this letter is made on behalf of more than 50,000 California citizens who support a cessation of the sea otter translocation program.

Defenders of Wildlife agrees with the conclusion presented in the Service's recently released Biological Opinion that the maintenance of a containment zone is jeopardizing the sea otter's ability to recover by artificially preventing its range expansion, and that at least one of the failure criteria for the translocation program has been met. We applaud the Service for issuing this Opinion in the face of the contentious history of sea otter conservation versus human use of

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fishery resources, and in light of the highly polarized nature of the interested parties. The Opinion appears to be supported by the best scientific data and, in both spirit and actuality, demonstrates a continued commitment to conserve this imperiled species for future generations.

However, steps are needed to truly put this species on course towards long-term recovery. It is Defenders' position that the translocation plan must be declared a failure and containment of otters north of Point Conception must end. Further, the southern sea otter recovery plan must be completed, and additional funding must be obtained from Congress for further investigation and on-going study. Defenders has been working on this latter aspect and has already gained some important congressional allies.

Two environmental issues deserving of study, which are presently of unquantified environmental value, are the following: (1) the value of the southern sea otter as a keystone species in marine ecosystems (particularly within kelp forests) and as an indicator of ecosystem health; and (2) the corresponding environmental and economic value inherent in the existence of flourishing kelp forests. We therefore recommend, as part of the scoping process, that the relationship of sea otters with the biological structure of kelp forest communities in California be addressed in the Supplemental EIS. Our recommendation finds support in the Endangered Species Act and the Marine Mammal Protection Act, both of which mandate an understanding of the relationship between a species and its ecosystem.

The sea otter/kelp forest relationship must be examined further for a complete understanding of the environmental impact of the presence or absence of any program containing and/or translocating sea otters. Sea otter foraging is known to limit numbers of benthic herbivorous invertebrates, particularly sea urchins. The result is kelp forests which are larger, more productive, and more diverse biologically and structurally. This relationship off coastal California, however, has been somewhat in dispute and must be resolved.

Kelp has profound effects on habitat for other coastal organisms. Kelp beds provide habitat for certain fish species that are exploited in commercial or recreational fisheries, and either the physical presence of kelp or the organic detritus derived from kelp beds probably sustains juvenile stages of fish species that as adults are exploited by humans. Thus the "top-down effect" of predation on shellfish by the southern sea otter results in an increased abundance of kelp leading to increased biodiversity and increased biomass production, as well as economic opportunity.

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Kelp is harvested and supports a significant economic enterprise in California. There are more than 100 square miles of kelp forest in California and commercial harvesters cut over 5 tons per day at an annual harvest value of more than \$50 million. Thus, any program designed to contain and/or translocate otters will have an impact on kelp harvesting economics.

The Service is well aware of the importance of these ecological and economic relationships. In the latest Draft Recovery Plan, issued in January of this year, at page 6 the Service notes that recovery and growth of sea otter populations is followed by a reduction in invertebrates and the consequent enhancement of kelp beds and some kelp-associated fishes. And, at pages 49-50 of the Plan, the Service notes in its recovery objectives and criteria a need to evaluate the potential for habitat-related differences in growth rates between populations of sea otters, stating that, "the relationship between habitat and population demography needs to be evaluated to determine if habitat is affecting population growth rates. Habitat surveys should continue. Evidence gathered to date indicates that there are important interactions between sea otters and the habitats in which they live and forage."

Paraphrasing the Service, it is clear that the conflicting issues of shellfish resource use by humans versus providing a habitat that will best contribute to the recovery of the southern sea otter, unwittingly resulted in the creation of a recovery/management plan which has turned out to be the primary barrier to the natural expansion of sea otters and recovery of their California population.

In 1971, when Congress considered the Marine Mammal Protection Act, it made the following observation: "Recent history indicates that man's impact upon marine mammals has ranged from what might be termed malign neglect to virtual genocide." We have, thankfully, come a long way in changing our attitudes, our actions, and our understanding of the importance of marine organisms and their impact on the human environment. At this point in time, progress in the recovery of this keystone species, the southern sea otter, requires that we more fully understand its interrelationships within the marine environment in which it lives.

Sincerely,

  
Nancy E. Weiss